Servants and Stewards
I Corinthians 3:18–4:5
November 15, 1964

Stewardship

11/13/66 ?

Motivation is a very important word today. Educators tell us that children learn and comprehend only when they are properly motivated. When we attempt to discover why we act as we do, Psychologists direct us to our inner motivations. In drama, the "method" school teaches its students that acting is authentic only when the actor is motivated to project himself completely into his role. In advertising and politics, millions upon millions of dollars are spent every year to penetrate the inner sanctum of our motivation: to discover why we vote and buy as we do: and to change our behavior by changing our motivations.

In our Scripture Lesson this morning we hear the Apostle Paul telling about his motivation. In a short and cogent sentence we hear him tell his readers why he did the the things he did. We are fortunate to have this bit of self-revelation: it tells us a lot about the Apostle and about Christian motivation. It affords us the opportunity of seeing Paul as he saw himself. It gives us the opportunity of comparing our motivations: our analysis of ourselves with his own.

The place was Corinth, a wealthy, worldly, sophisticated Metropolis. The fledgling Christian Church in Corinth had been established by Paul. That it was important to him is clear: a major block of the New Testament, His letters written to that church are ~~is his letters written to that church~~. The immediate problem was the criticism Paul was receiving from the secular Corinthians. His integrity had been called into question: he had been maligned as an opportunist and a greedy self seeker. Apparently the criticism had taken its toll: some of the Corinthian Christians had begun to falter and waiver in loyalty to the Church.

It is to this situation that Paul is responding. It is in response to this criticism and these question that he replies by way of stating clearly how he sees himself: how he is motivated: and how he wishes others to think of him.

"This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God." On the surface its rather surprising that this awesome man should see himself in such humble terms. He very well might have called himslef a ~~preacher~~ a great preacher

in the prophetic ~~lives~~ line of Isaiah & Jeremiah: He might have pointed out his sabolarly status as a Pharisee, or his honored title-citizen of Rome. He very well might have said, "This is how you ought to regard me, -as a maker and molder of history." In retrospect, we can give Paul all these titles, certainly the whole evolution of Western civilization was radically influenced by his efforts. But the point is that Paul saw himself in menial terms, servant and steward. He saw himself clearly as an instrument, a tool in the hands of God. ~~He would be satisfied to call himself a well marked road sign, Pointing the way to his Lord Jesus Christ.~~ Paul would have his readers remember him as a trustworthy steward. (2)

Like many words, steward or stewardship has lost much of its original intent. I suppose the Church is as guilty as anyone here, for to us, stewardship means budgets, and giving and pledging, money matters. But originally, a Steward was a business manager. A wealthy man would choose one of his servants to manage his affairs, buying and selling, hiring and firing, all the transactions involved in running an affluent household. It was a responsible position, and yet the good Steward could never forget that it was another man's affairs he was handling; there was no room for capriciousness or carelessness. A Steward had to be absolutely trustworthy and absolutely loyal to his master. ~~And so~~ It was a responsibility, but it was also a type of servitude. To be effective as steward had to forget himself and act always on behalf of someone else. ~~I know of one position in our day that bears the name Steward, a position I once held myself-Steward of a Fraternity. In this office, it was my job to manage the kitchen, oversee the waiters and dishwashers, plead with or threaten the cook, and above all else, to see that no more money was spent than came in. In short, the Steward acted on behalf of the entire Fraternity, spending the Fraternity's money in a way most beneficial to the Fraternity itself.~~

(3) This is how Paul wished to be known-as a servant of Christ, and a Steward of the mysteries of God. ~~In the final analysis, it would be God, not men, who judged whether or not he had been an effective steward.~~

(4) It's a far cry from our loose employment of the "stewardship" concept. We use it

when it is convenient-whenever we have a budget to subscribe,-or a building program to support. But for the early Christians,-to be a Christian meant being a Steward. Stewardship was not one aspect of the Gospel to be dragged out and drummed to death every fall. Rather, it was a practical, down to earth way, a man could understand what it meant to be a Christian.

The early Church realized, as we do not, that to ~~it~~ them had been entrusted a precious gem-the good news. ~~Early Christians~~ they knew more about being Stewards of the Gospel because they were the only ones that had it. It was their possession, and they could experience the ~~stewardship~~ stewarding of it of handling, spreading, and cultivating it throughout the world.

The early Christians told their story simply. God, they testified, loves us with a love that will not let us go. He has come to us in Jesus of Nazareth. This Jesus, born of a virgin, raised in a Jewish home, ate and drank, worked and selpt, taught and listened, healed and helped; then one day was crucified ~~by lawless men~~ as a criminal by the state. He was mocked and jeered-his friends deserted him, he was buried in a borrrowed grave.

An then, they testified, he was raised from the dead by the power of Almighty God. Suffering, death and the grave had no dominion over.him. They went on to tell that he was seen again among men: many witnesses could be found who saw him and touched him. And then, he disappeard: some said he ascended bodily into the heavens.

The story was not complete, however, until they had told how it was with them afterward. They couldn't return to their resprctive lives. Somehow, in a strange and mysterious way they were drawn together in a new relationship. A strange power came over them, and gradually they realized that they were a beloved fellowship, entrusted with the knowledge of the mighty act God had done in their midst. Gradually they realized that God had revealed himself to them - and then made them stewards of this revelation. On behalf of God, they, the beloved community, were to bring this incredibly good news to the whole world. God had made them stewards of the Gospel. They would have to be absolutley trustworthy, absolutely ~~honest~~ loyal: they would have to reorient their lives around their appointed task: nothing less would be acceptable.

5

I doubt that the contemporary church ever sees itself as the manager of God's business on earth. I doubt that we ever think of Christianity as a precious gift, given to us by God: a gift we have been given to share and to manage. The reasons we do not see ourselves primarily as Stewards are several. Firstly, the Gospel, simply stated, startles no one any more. The earlty Christians could feel like Stewards because they had something no one else had. But today everyone has it: everyone knowsw who Jesus is, and nearly everyone thinks of himeslef as a Christian. A christian today does not appear to be any different from ~~xxx~~ everyone else: in fact, Christians generally emphasize how very much a part of the crowd they really are. In short, Christianity has been effectively enveloped by American culture to the point that everyone thinks he's a Christian just because he's an American. Admittedly, in this context it is difficult to feel that we have in our possession soemthing that everyone else needs:

Secondly, we don't know much about being Stewards of the Gospel because we have compromised the essentiall exclusive nature of that Gospel. The whole population thinks of itself as Christian, and the Chruch, the Steward of the mysteries of God, has found it very profitabl to be accomodating. Instead of the specific proclaimations of the New Testament, the Chruch dispenses generalities. Instead of pointing to the man Jesus Christ in everything it does-- the Church advocates clean living. Instead of speaking God's word, the church refl ects its members' words. Instead o f discovering new ways to tell tne world that Jesus Christ was God incarnate the Chrch hides this bit of eternally good news under a blanket of sentimentalism and positive thinking. Martin Marty descirbes it as "religion in general" all-inclusive, offensive to no one, very respectable and highly profitable. This is why we don't know much about Stewardship of the Gospel - we have forgotten the Gospel itself. So invloved in our programs and activities have we become, that daily we fail to speak a firm and definite word about jesus Christ.

The Gospel is as ~~xxxxxxx~~ powerful today as it ever was. The news that Jesus Christ was God incarnate, that he lived, died and rose again that we might find new life is as relevant and cogent today today as it was in the first century. But soemone must say it: someone must meet the world head-on and in new and precise terms tell the world that nothing in creation

willbe able to spearate us from the love of God, in Christ Jesus our Lord. That someone id the Church: and the Church is you and me - individuals who are called to be servants and Stewards of the Gospel.

Speaking now of the narrow definition of Stewardship, budgets, money and pladges, no one could possibly be staisfied with the performance of American C"ristianity. The average church member spends more for cigarettes than he goves to the chrch. Each year we wail and put on the hair shirt when its ~~them~~ time for the Every Member Canvas. We beg and plead - and corparat look forward to that blesssdd day when the average yearly pledge will equal the national average per capit a spending for liquor. Perhaps the reason for this study in irony is precisely that we have extracted Stewardship from Christianity, made it into a program, an area of emphasis, and confined it to the month of November. Perhaps we have so isolated Stewardhsip that it no longer has anything to do with our peronsal commitment to Jesus Christ.

And so we need very badly to hear Paul's words to the Corinthians. We need to recapture the early Christians understanding of themselves as Stewards - God's men, men whosee entire lives were focussed on their task of being loyal and trustworthy stewards.

Arhtur McCay, President of McCormick Seminary has said: "All Stewardship teaching and practice im the Churches ought to begin with the recognition that the rightful core of of every Christians' entire response to God's mighty acts among men in Jesus Chris, is the Stewardship of the Gospel. Everything the Christian is called to be and to do must be seen as the working out of his acknowledgement of the gift of the Gospel."

In the past several weeks you have heard a great deal about the new church we are planning to build. This week you received a brochure telling you about a percentage goal established by a group of representative laymen. In the coming weeks there will be alot of figuring done, a lot of mental arithmeti c: and if every member meets that percentage goal we will have no difficulty building a new and beautiful Presbyterian Church. And yet if all we do is meet a percentage goal, it will be a hollow gesture. If all this program accomplishes is the construction of a new building it will be a shallow victory.

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Conclusion - see Nov. 13, 1966